Pandemic transformative experience

How COVID-19 is changing us

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A locked-down life

Our experience of the current pandemic and subsequent lockdown and social distancing has radically transformed our sense and appreciation of the everyday. Practically and socially, our lives have transformed, often in ways that are clearly poor substitutes for what came before – we work from home, or try to, queue glumly outside shops, spend Saturday nights at Zoom parties. New terms become salient – 'R rates', 'excess deaths', 'lockdown' and of course the ubiquitous, if inaccurate, 'social distancing'.

Psychologically and emotionally, many experience new patterns of anxiety: we now greet others with suspicion and have new fears of seeing our parents; we count the days gone without a hug. Most of us have seen too much or too little of loved ones, and the strain of 'home schooling' (a euphemism for anarchy for many of us) has taken its toll on many parents and carers. Many of us feel a dull pang of regret at our earlier complacent patterns of life – invitations turned down; opportunities dismissed with a shrug. We think back with awe at how tens of thousands of people congregated to watch live music or sports events. Did we really stand so close and so casually to others? When life changes in radical ways, we can become retrospective, feeling new nostalgia for earlier ways of living most of us previously took for granted.

Some optimistic commentators assure us that much good will come of these painful collective experiences of disruption and uncertainty. Without denying the great and ongoing suffering of the moment, the optimists tell us that deep lessons are being learned – a

revised spirit of neighbourliness, perhaps, renewed appreciation for the importance of family, or new respect for key workers. Some optimists even talk of a 'moral renaissance', offering the stirring vision of the pandemic as that which will 'bring out the best in humanity'. We clapped for the NHS and for key workers, formed community support groups, and came together in a warm spirit of collective solidarity and goodwill. Granted, these attractive transformations of our collective moral complexion were marred by mindless panic-buying and raves full of lockdown breakers. The widespread anti-racism Black Lives Matter protests in response to the murder of George Floyd also spoiled the morally optimistic story about the pandemic provoking a 'moral renaissance'. But the optimists are seeing potential for change – politically, environmentally, socially, and personally – arising from the pandemic. They see it as an opportunity to forge a better life for people and the environment across the globe.

A more pessimistic stance on the morally transformative power of the pandemic emphasises the durability of certain human dispositions. Moral lessons are often forgotten as quickly as they are learned, especially if they require us to practically change how we live. On this view, the sense of neighbourly sociability will dissipate as soon as we feel safe again in the world. Adult children who now dutifully call their parents every day will gradually slip back into more incommunicative habits. Our capacity for enduring moral transformation is often hampered by these sorts of dispositions – our complacent willingness to tolerate

unjust conditions, as long as we are not personally disadvantaged by them, for instance, or the fragility of our sense of filial duty when it runs up against even the most minimal of practical requests. Indeed, as lockdown restrictions are relaxed, many of the positive moral changes will be trampled underfoot in the rush to reclaim normality. Or so say the moral pessimists.

It remains to be seen whether the dramatic events related to the pandemic will initiate a dramatic 'moral renaissance', perhaps recalling the collectivist British national mood after WW2 which led to the welfare state and the NHS. There will be various verdicts from historians, sociologists, and political and religious leaders and contributions by philosophers, too, keen to define the terms of any 'moral renaissance'. What sorts of moral values and concepts, for instance, are at work when we talk about a radical transformation of our collective moral behaviour? And how could the disruptive experiences of pandemic and lockdown contribute to personal and collective moral transformation? More fundamentally, what sorts of concepts do we need if we are to properly articulate the transformations of our character, values, assumptions, and sense of what matters provoked by those experiences? Here we suggest that a useful concept for addressing that last task is that of a *transformative experience*, in the sense developed in the eponymous book by L.A. Paul.

Transformative experience

In her 2014 book, Paul argues that certain experiences are *transformative* insofar as they radically alter those who have them. In a very real sense, the person undergoing a transformative experience is no longer the same person they were before; they have been transformed. When one undergoes a transformative experience, they undergo radical changes to their values, commitments, and aspirations – the very things which constitute the distinctive integrity of our identities as the particular person we are. So, a transformative experience is *personally* transformative: it deeply changes the person who undergoes it. An example much discussed by philosophers following Paul's 2015 paper, 'What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting', is that of becoming a parent. Many people say it has profoundly changed their values and preferences and has given them a new outlook on life.

An experience can also be *epistemically* transformative if it provides a person with knowledge and understanding otherwise inaccessible. Think of how people describe experiences of warfare or pregnancy as forms of first-person understanding one just can't get in any other way than serving in frontline combat or gestating a baby. No descriptions or imagination can tell one what it is going to be like *for you*. The only way to find out is to have the experience.

For an experience to count as transformative, it needs to be both personally and epistemically transformative. It needs to change our personality, values and goals, and it also needs to give us new knowledge that we could not otherwise gain.

A fascinating feature of transformative experiences is that their capacity to radically transform our personal identity and knowledge problematises how we think about human agency. Of course, we are not always free to choose our experiences. Becoming pregnant, for instance, can't be simply *chosen*. One can choose to *try* to become pregnant, success in which depends on, among other things, bodily and social factors – like biological fertility, or availability of healthcare.

Within her book, Paul tends to focus on certain kinds of transformative experiences, especially what one might call *voluntary* experiences, that originate in a person's act of choice. Choosing to try for a baby, for instance, or opting to eat the durian fruit – apparently 'the world's smelliest fruit' – give rise to unique knowledge available only to those who have chosen to try these things.

Now we come to the crux of the matter: the pandemic has afforded us experiences that most of us would never have chosen. Who would choose to lose their job, cancel a wedding, not see loved ones for months, or to suffer a life-threatening illness? And yet, we're all forced to have 'pandemic transformative experiences' that were foisted upon us.

Paul focuses on the question of choices being made under conditions of uncertainty. How should I choose, she asks, whether to become a parent, when I have no way of knowing in advance if I will enjoy the experience or be good at it? How should I decide if I want to be changed by parenthood, if I don't know what sort of values and preferences I will have once I become a parent? Paul suggests that this poses a challenge to rational choice theory, and especially to the idea that big life choices are made rationally. We won't go into the details of this challenge here. Instead we want to focus on transformative experiences that were not chosen, or indeed were forced on people who are then transformed by these experiences against their will. In fact, we think – as we argue in a 2019 paper in the *European Journal of Philosophy* – that most transformative experiences are not elected.

First, there are *involuntary experiences*, the ones that result from the unchosen contingencies of life. Imagine a person who, on seeing a child wander into a busy road, rushes over to help them, only to be hit by a car and become permanently disabled. That is an experience that will be deeply transformative, albeit not the outcome of any voluntary choice. Second, there are *non-voluntary experiences*, ones imposed on someone by external forces, often the malevolence of human beings. Think of the awful experiences of the millions of human beings held by oppressive regimes in concentration camps, like Primo Levi's experiences in the Nazi-operated camp at Auschwitz, recorded in his memoir, *If This Is*

A Man. Levi did not, and never would have, chosen to be interred in a concentration camp, yet the experience deeply transformed him.

Pandemic transformative experience

We can now consider whether the COVID-19 pandemic is a form of transformative experience, perhaps a blend of involuntary and non-voluntary set of experiences. Seeing the overall pandemic experience as a mix of positive and negative experiences will enable us to account for its richness. But first we must establish whether pandemic experiences meet the dual criteria of being personally and epistemically transformative.

There is strong evidence that pandemic experiences have personally transformed us. Many have written and spoken about how their values and preferences have changed when lockdown was imposed. We have seen an awakened appreciation of the crucial role of schools, supporting not only children's education but also their wellbeing, social needs and development. Many have stopped buying new clothes and make-up. We have gone without eating out, sitting in cafes, and professional haircuts for months. This has led many to wonder whether we want to spend so much on fashion and takeaway lattes. Similarly, many who thought their happiness depended on an exotic holiday discovered their unexpected appreciation of reopened local campsite.

Much has been written on the new and powerful realisation that those who care for the elderly, drive delivery vans and work in supermarkets are serving their communities a lot more than better rewarded, more prestigious, jobs. Numerous posts on social media questioned past behaviour and issued vows not to resume some bad old habits, such as not seeing one's children enough during the week, wearing different clothes every day, or eating out as much. It is certain that this profound shaking up of our social habits and ways of being has transformed how we understand ourselves and our social existence and has changed our values, preferences, and goals. So, there is rich evidence that pandemic experience has personally transformed us.

Epistemically, the transformation is profound. We now know what it is like to live in an age of a global pandemic which affected us in ways we never imagined. The unanticipated and fast unfolding of the pandemic has surprised us: who imagined that we will walk around donning a face mask and gloves? Who could have foreseen a school closure lasting this long? Knowing *what it is like* to live through a pandemic is new knowledge that could not have been acquired otherwise. The knowledge, for instance, of the dread at accidentally touching a park gate. Lockdown has given us knowledge of what it is like to live in fear and isolation for weeks on end, especially for those who have been shielding. Watching the news each night and seeing the devastation – personal, physical, social, economic – meted on millions of people is a novel experience that has profoundly changed

how we think and what we know. We have certainly been epistemically transformed by the pandemic.

Next, we can turn to the question whether such experiences are in- or non-voluntary or perhaps some of them are voluntary? To address the question, we need to see first how varied and deeply different pandemic experiences have been. Different health care systems, health inequities and diverse social, political and economic conditions have meant that the pandemic has been experienced in radically different ways by different people. For example, those who are older have felt anxious about the virus' ability to cause serious illness and death. Others, perhaps younger and more confident, may treat the pandemic as a nuisance, or even as 'hype' created by conspirators. The resolute denial of the virus' virulence in the US and Brazil has led to a very different experience compared to, say, Taiwan and Vietnam, where it has been effectively contained. For millions of Americans living with no health insurance and no economic safety net, the threat of the virus is much greater than those in other countries who have universal health care and a decent social care system.

Different people experience social distancing differently too. For some, there have been positive effects. Returning to our moral optimist, for some this has been an opportunity to rebuild civic life in more empathic, communal, and caring ways. Some have discovered the joys of a slower, less pressurised life. It made the possibility of working from home, not flying, and commuting by bike, and hence a greener way of life, a firm reality. It

showed that social change is possible and that it can happen overnight. These are some of the positive pandemic experiences, no less transformative for being positively valenced.

Yet others have lost a loved one or suffered serious COVID-19 illness. Many made enormous sacrifices and contended with the daily risk of contracting the virus. People who lived on their own endured months of isolation. Those who have had to shield were instructed to stay at home without so much as a daily walk, for more than ten weeks. All but the very richest endure fears of economic instability and anxiety about job security. These are some of the negative pandemic experiences. Into the longer term, it may be that COVID-19 comes to be experienced a collective trauma on a massive scale: we are only at the beginning of this.

What can we say about all these experiences put together? How can we usefully reflect on the rich array of experiences, cumulatively constituting a 'pandemic transformative experience'? We suggest that we view many of these experiences as non-voluntary transformative experiences, but that we emphasise the diversity and difference of individual circumstances within collective conditions. In general, none of us wanted the pandemic. So, the pandemic experience is a *globally non-voluntary transformative experience*. But within that people have had a variety of experiences, ranging from dreadful to wonderful. And these more localised experiences can be split into some that are non-voluntary and some that are involuntary. Let us look more closely at each.

Non-voluntary experiences are ones that are not, and could not have been, chosen. The experience of falling seriously ill with COVID-19 is a paradigmatic example of a non-voluntary transformative experience. *Involuntary experiences* are ones that people have chosen, but under conditions of radical uncertainty. The health professionals who died tragically of COVID-19 while looking after patients came willingly to work, but didn't choose to become ill. They chose to come to work and fulfil their role or duty, not to die. Thinking more broadly about involuntary experiences, we may say that some of us were able to choose certain ways of responding to pandemic, such as for the first time joining a community group, but none of us have chosen the wider transformative reality of pandemic.

Transformed pandemic reality

The pandemic has revealed what we call the 'facts of life' – our bodily vulnerability, the fragility of our taken-for-granted ways of life, the precarity of the world we inhabit. Accepting this can be tough since it demands an existentially charged grasp of the contingency and fragility of our existence. Karl Jaspers powerfully describes the sense of 'metaphysical fear' that can arise when the surrounding structures of certainty are disrupted, leaving one to decide – anew and alone – how best to live. Applied to transformative experiences, what Jaspers describes is a disorienting sense of the fragility of

our identity and of our sense of how to live. Confronting the perpetual possibility of transformative experience capable of erupting into our everyday existence is existentially difficult – a task, says Jaspers, calling for 'inner resistance'.

In an ideal scenario, one has time to prepare in advance to face that demanding task. Unfortunately, the pandemic forced it upon us, thrusting transformative experiences upon us – not just a single dramatic experience, but a whole cascade of experiences. How it affects us depends on a host of political, cultural, social, economic, and epidemiological factors, including the gendered, racial, and socioeconomic inequalities built into our societies. Whatever its form, confronting our vulnerability to radical transformative experiences is hard. The current pandemic has powerfully revealed just how vulnerable and dependent on each other we are. It forces us to confront the perpetual possibility of existentially radical transformative experience that is moreover also a collective one.

Fortunately, we have some resources, not least the experiences of those with some prior experience of coping with adversity. Think of pathographies, first-person accounts of chronic somatic illness, which offer reflections on coping with disruptive changes to our experience of our bodies, others, and the world. A common theme of such writing is that radical experiences act as a powerful demand to reflect, to think, to philosophise, as Havi Carel articulates in her book, *Illness*. She suggests that this demand can also show us the productive power of adversity: that it can be a source of adaptability, creativity, and new

perspectives. We should therefore welcome this positive aspect of adversity, rather than viewing adversity as wholly negative. We cannot avoid adversity in our lives, the facts of life tell us. It is a powerful source of transformation. We therefore ought to study how it can be of use to us, how we can harness it for better self-knowledge, understanding and edification. As Shakespeare writes in *As You Like It*, “Sweet are the uses of adversity, Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.”